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*In the Autumn 1985 edition of the Catholic Lawyer, Professor David Gregory wrote a book review of Thomas More: A Biography, by Richard Marius. The following article by Professor Minnich is submitted as an alternative interpretation of the work.*

## SECOND THOUGHTS ON THOMAS MORE BIOGRAPHY†

NELSON H. MINNICH\*

On this the 450th anniversary of the martyrdom of St. Thomas More (1473-1535), Richard Marius has published a very readable, comprehensive biography, *Thomas More: A Biography*,<sup>1</sup> of the "living being behind the glorified mummy." Marius comes to his task with impressive credentials. Soon after graduating from Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, Marius began his quarter-century of More studies with a dissertation at Yale University on More's polemical writings against heretics and then went on to become an editor of five of the volumes in the *Complete Works of St. Thomas More*<sup>2</sup> series. Given his gifts as a writer, it is no surprise that he is now head of the expository writing program at Harvard College. If the story of More he presents is based on an intimate knowledge of the sources and is told with literary skill, his judgements about the man often reflect the minority views of hostile British scholars such as Geoffrey Elton and Jasper Ridley and seem aimed at demolishing any illusions about More held by liberal Catholics and devout moderns.

Marius tries to discover the inner man behind the restrained yet witty public figure. He accuses More of self-consciously performing throughout his life roles others must admire and cheer, and of being torn between pleasing God or man. While More encouraged others to entertain

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<sup>1</sup> MARIUS, *THOMAS MORE: A BIOGRAPHY* (Knopf 526 p.)

<sup>2</sup> MARIUS, *COMPLETE WORKS OF ST. THOMAS MORE*.

an opinion as to his own sanctity, he carefully presented a public image calculated to advance his worldly ambitions. But beneath the stoical facade was a raging fury that heaped verbal abuse on the enemies of his country and church. He attacked with biting irony and later with acrimony the chauvinistic writings of the French humanist, Germain de Brie, and as a defender of his embattled church, More resorted to his considerable skills as a lawyer to argue his defendant's case. Marius claims that while More did not precisely lie, he was far from impartial and willingly distorted facts, and perhaps even held that the end justifies the means. More was more concerned with defending the church's unity and teaching authority than with establishing papal primacy. He saw councils as the ultimate authority in the church and looked to them to determine the extent of papal power. To the considerable annoyance of the royal henchmen who interrogated him just prior to his imprisonment, More stated that Henry VIII had earlier persuaded him to accept the divine foundation of papal primacy. Nonetheless, Marius asserts that More was always ambivalent about papal power.

As the principle English popular apologist and the prosecuting Chancellor of the Realm, More, according to Marius, revealed in his attacks on heretics a fury that was "almost the essence of the man." This aspect of "the man for all seasons" is the "most dubious and most embarrassing to his modern admirers." His polemical works were at times "tedious," "thoroughly unpleasant," "bad-tempered," peppered with vulgar verbal abuse and displayed a vehemence that was ultimately "a cry of frustration and helplessness" in the face of advancing Protestantism. As a royal official, his treatment of heretics was rarely marked by tolerance, pity or mercy. His methods were harsh. He wanted unrepentant heretics burnt. So hysterical was he about Protestants that, had he not fallen from royal favor after Henry's divorce, he would have become the Torquemada of England. Marius speculates that the driving forces behind this rage were More's repressed sexuality and his doubts about the legitimacy of Christianity itself.

Marius devotes considerable attention to sexual matters. He singles out one strain of Christian teachings on sex, caricatures it and declares: "All this is nonsense to us. . . ." Although Augustine, who was More's favorite saint and the principal shaper of his mind, held that pride is "the mother of all vice," Marius characterizes his teachings so that Christian salvation becomes redemption from sensuality. A conflict of guilt for having bowed to the demands of the flesh is propounded as the ruling drama in More's life. Although attracted to the monastic life as a youth, More found the demands of his sexual drive more powerful and married. Marius claims More was never comfortable with this decision and feared he risked all hell itself when he gave himself up to marriage. When his first child was born he plunged himself into translating the scoffing and bawdy

Lucian in order to relieve his anxieties, and when his first wife Jane died, More quickly remarried to fall under a canonical impediment to the priesthood. Because his new wife, Dame Alice, was beyond childbearing years, More probably abstained from sexual relations with her; the marriage thus becoming a continuing penance. To expiate his guilt for not having entered the celibate clerical state, More exalted the clergy in his writings. When Protestant reformers, often former priests, not only praised the marital state but took wives themselves, More's fury was unleashed. He found peace at last when Henry VIII removed him from temptations and confined him in a cell of the Tower, so similar to the monastic cell he had earlier rejected for marriage.

More was also torn by a conflict between medieval piety and modern skepticism. In many ways, "More was to the marrow of his bones a medieval Christian" whose esteem for tradition was reinforced by his training at Oxforde and Inns of the Court; he lived in "the world of agonizing doubt that was the Christian Renaissance." In keeping with his peculiar theory that the 16th century suffered a prolonged crisis of belief about the legitimacy of Christianity, Marius posits that More "might have been driven by the horrifying suspicion that Christianity might be a myth" and that to smother his doubts he affirmed Catholic teachings with a seemingly unshakable certainty. The evidence Marius offers for this theory of the era and man is far from persuasive.

Another of his provocative theses holds that More and Erasmus were much less intimate and more distant friends than earlier biographers have fancied. This thesis is based in good part on two dubious premises: psychological differences preclude intimate friendships, and the absence of surviving letters is serious evidence of a chill in their relations. More persuasive are Marius's arguments based on More's delay in praising the *Moriae Ecomium*, Erasmus's failure to applaud the *Utopia* and the Dutchman's reluctance to write against the heretics, despite repeated prodding from More.

Marius's analysis of More's public career with its rise from city official and judge to Member of Parliament, diplomat, Speaker of Commons, royal secretary and councilor, and finally Chancellor, makes for fascinating reading. Far from having public offices thrust upon him, More did all that was necessary to further his advancement: do the bidding of his superiors, flatter those in power, accept thankless and unremunerative posts in the hope of later reward and be known as an affable companion and reliable servant. Given this strategy of career advancement, More exercised very little influence on government policy. As royal secretary he was a go-between for Henry VIII and Thomas Wolsey, and carried out policies others originated. Because he had proven himself a tamed humanist, subservient, easy to get along with, conservative and skillful lawyer, More was the logical choice as a figurehead Chancellor to replace the

once-powerful Wolsey. Marius portrays him as a puppet of little influence, whom men went around rather than through. His resignation following the clergy's capitulation to the King should not be considered an act of principled protest, for he had long asked to resign. Henry determined when to dismiss him. Despite his efforts to depict More as ineffectual and compliant, Marius must admit that Wolsey so feared his open criticism of the Cardinal's foreign policy that he had him removed from the royal council. And when More's private efforts to dissuade the King from his schismatic course failed, he lobbied members of Parliament to prevent passage of Henry's bills attacking the church's liberty.

Marius is puzzled as to why More died. Relying on the study of Duncan Denett, he analyzes the charges brought against More at his trial. More not only accepted Parliament's power to designate the offspring of Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn as his legal heir, but spoke publicly in favor of his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. What More would not accept was Parliament's power to break the English Church off from the church universal. Despite More's oath to the contrary, Marius seems to accept that Richard Riche's testimony that More had dropped his guard and spoken against Parliament's power to force consent to its actions in this area. More's refusal "to save his own life by speaking a few words" remains a mystery for Marius because he holds that only the insane die for what they believe. To find an explanation that precludes grace and faith, Marius posits that More's reluctant willingness to die grew out of his need to maintain consistency, to self-validate his life and thus to preserve his integrity.

Marius's interpretations of More are colored by a number of dubious premises. Few scholars would accept his thesis that Christianity itself was in danger of being rejected on the eve of the Reformation because reason could no longer support it against the attacks of Renaissance skepticism. The virulence of the reformers' affirmation of their particular positions may indeed suggest a defense against doubt, but the legitimacy of Christianity itself was not what provoked their violent responses. The extreme estimation Marius attaches to rationality leads him to adopt, as his criterion of what is normative, a distorted view of man that has little or no room for emotions and faith; his skepticism and cynicism about things religious show themselves in his analysis of humility.

Marius's hostility toward Catholicism is not based on a deep understanding of it. Seemingly gratuitous jabs are made at Christ's celibacy, at the Pope as Christ's vicar and at papal infallibility. His theology of the priesthood is surely not derived from serious research: All the sacraments of the Church do not depend on priests; apostolic succession is not based on priests ordaining priests, and the holiness of the priestly office does not come from the priest's not touching female genitalia. Marius needs to do further research on concurring salvation since what he has written bor-

ders upon caricature. Let me cite other areas he might correct. His treatment of predestination confuses God's active and permissive wills, divine determination and foreknowledge. His summary of Thomas Aquinas's views on the relation between faith and reason is simplistic and wrong. His description of transubstantiation as a "miraculous illusion" betrays a profound misunderstanding of this teaching. In Catholic theology saints are venerated, not worshipped. The church did not claim any certain knowledge in the internal forum about the state of the soul of the living, nor did consensus alone (without confirmatory miracles) reveal for the 16th-century church which of the dead were saints. It is doubtful that Winchester, rather than, say, Toledo, was the wealthiest see of Christendom after Rome. Lorenzo Campeggio was administrator, not titular bishop, of the see of Salisbury. Erasmus was a canon regular of the Chapter of Sion; Luther a friar of the Hermits of St. Augustine; they were not monks of the same order as suggested by Marius. While Eck did not have printed a version of his *Enchiridion* dedicated only to More, he did address a dedicatory letter to him in the edition printed at Landshut in May, 1526. The "crown imperial" that Henry owed to the Pope was most probably the secret grant to Henry VIII by Julius II of the crown of France, on the condition he wrest it from the schismatic Louis XII. This grant was probably let to stand during subsequent conflicts between the papacy and France.

But perhaps the most serious weakness of the book is Marius's penchant for speculating on More's inner thoughts and feelings. The evidence in the corpus of More's writings just does not support his theses on the repressed sexuality and profound doubts about religion. One cannot help wondering about the nature of the source from which these derive. It is thus unfortunate that in the absence of an alternative, Marius's biography will probably shape a generation or two of thinking about More.